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## Egypt's Police State in the Work of Idris and Mahfouz

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**Volume 14 Issue 4 (December 2012) Article 3**  
**David F. DiMeo,**  
**"Egypt's Police State in the Work of Idris and Mahfouz"**  
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**Abstract:** In his article "Egypt's Police State in the Work of Idris and Mahfouz" David F. DiMeo examines how two leading twentieth-century authors of politically committed fiction addressed an angry generation's confrontations with former members of the oppressive state police apparatus. Yusuf Idris's *The Black Policeman* (1962) and Najib Mahfouz's *al-Karnak* (1974) remain particularly relevant as today's Egyptian activists confront the vestiges of the former regime's security forces. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnival as a paradigm for analysis, DiMeo examines how both texts present sharp contrasts between hollow quests for public revenge through purges and a genuine overturning of political and social situations.

**First name DAVID DIMEO**

### **Egypt's Police State in the Work of Idris and Mahfouz**

Egypt's recent revolution has given new life to the hopes for political and social change about which activist authors wrote a half century ago. A dream of moving millions into political action through the written word lay at the heart of the movement of politically "committed" Arab-language literature — *al-adab al-multazim* — that reached its peak of influence in Egypt in the mid-twentieth century. At the height of its influence in the 1950s, the movement's flagship journal *al-Adab* boasted that *al-adab al-multazim* so "dominated" the Arab-language literary world that it no longer required definition (see, e.g., al-Ma'addawi, "Zawaya" 9; Wahhabi 24). Descending quickly from that lofty peak, however, the vanguard writers and critics of activist literature — *littérature engagée* — spent much of the ensuing decades debating why their efforts had not produced the desired political and social change. With the clarity of hindsight, the fundamental contrasts in Egyptian society during the recent Arab Spring and the time of *al-adab al-multazim*'s flourishing seem clear. The sheer insufficiency of vehicles for freely publishing and distributing the written word in the 1950s — as well as the limited capacities of the mass audience to digest it, much less organize any type of action based on it — stand out in sharp contrast to the penetration of mass electronic media in a largely literate twenty-first century Egyptian society. Despite the myriad differences between the *multazim* ("committed") authors of the 1950s and the Facebook activists of 2011, their similar goals and shared faith in the mass public and written communication link the two groups. Contemporary authors like Ibrahim Abdel Meguid and Alaa al-Aswany have been instrumental in bridging the gap between print fiction and cyberspace, yet their predecessors, who did not live to see the rise of Facebook, still offer a rich field of politically and socially committed writing for consideration by the current generation of activists accustomed to communication under the 140-character limit of Twitter.

In this article I examine two texts from leading figures of *al-adab al-multazim* that address one of the thorniest problems facing today's Egyptian reformers: dealing with the legacy of the security police. Besides the dictator Mubarak himself, the black-suited security forces served as the most recognizable symbol of the oppressive regime. Indeed, the turning point of the revolution in many Egyptian eyes came with the replacement of Mubarak's hated police by the conscripted troops of the Egyptian army (see Fahmy 105). Yet it may be easier for revolutionaries to vilify the police as a symbol of the enemy in popular discourse than to deal with the real people who filled the ranks of that organ in a post-revolution Egyptian society. Two landmark works of activist Egyptian literature — Yusuf Idris's *The Black Policeman* (1962) and Najib Mahfouz's *al-Karnak* (1974) — addressed the question of reconciling a wounded public with the fallen members of the security forces over thirty years before the Tahrir Revolution of 2011. Both works describe the fate of once-dreaded police interrogators who fall from power into the hands of the political opponents they previously tortured. Both texts center on the reactions of those former victims to this sudden reversal of roles. Neither text, however, resolves these confrontations in any of the numerous ways convention might suggest. In fact, their treatments of these encounters are so provocative as to be labeled "unpalatable" by respected critics (see El-Enany 116-19). The unpalatable and ultimately unsatisfying conclusions to these stories, I argue, problematizes the issue of recovery from oppression in a manner particularly appropriate for the contemplation of Egypt's currently uncertain future. To view such unconventional treatment of grave subjects, I believe the equally unconventionally lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the "carnival" is useful.

Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the medieval carnival — detailed in his *Rabelais and His World* — has given rise to numerous, often conflicting interpretations. Bakhtin's text invites these divergent readings, to some extent, as it offers not a systematic theory of the carnival, but, rather, a wide range of impressions of this powerful element of medieval popular culture. Dominating Bakhtin's sweeping view of the carnival, however, is a fundamental overturning of hierarchical distinctions and erasure of dividing lines between social categories. Carnival mixes the sacred and the profane, the elite and the masses, the clean and the filthy, and other categories of social interaction. No niche is safe from the intrusion of the carnival and Bakhtin even finds the spirit of the carnival reaching to profaning the deity (*Rabelais* 16). Certainly, Bakhtin's vision of medieval popular culture has been critiqued as

overly positive (see, e.g., Dentith 76). Indeed, one senses a feeling of nostalgic utopia as he describes how "a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age," with the ultimate effect that all were "reborn for new, purely human relations" (*Rabelais* 10). Bakhtin demarcates the atmosphere of the carnival with that of otherwise normal medieval society. When not in this "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the prevailing order" (*Rabelais* 10) medieval society lived under a rigid hierarchy.

From the beginning, Bakhtin separates the carnival from "the official feast" (*Rabelais* 10). Michael Holquist sees Bakhtin's description of the popular carnival as a "specific dialogue" with Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet "Commissar of Enlightenment." Bakhtin's interest in the carnival was inspired by Lunacharsky's official research into popular festivals, but the two researchers arrived at different conclusions. While the Soviet effort aimed to harness the merriment of feasts as "a safety valve for passions the common people might otherwise direct to revolution" (Holquist xviii) and thus, a means to suppressing the public, Bakhtin saw the carnival as liberating in itself. Genuine carnival, as opposed to the "self-serving festivals fostered by governments" (Holquist xviii) was larger than and outside the control of the political authorities. Likewise, Simon Dentith, who considers this reading just one possible interpretation of Bakhtin's work, nonetheless sees Bakhtin's celebration of the "grotesque realism" (71) of the carnival as a counterpoint to the doctrinally rigid Socialist Realism that became official policy in 1934. Indeed, this axis of comparison, on which Holquist locates Bakhtin's carnival as the opposite pole from the state-sponsored popular culture represented by Maxim Gorky (xviii) proves the most useful for viewing the resistance of the Egyptian authors below to government attempts at public appeasement. At heart, the role of the elite in the event determines whether a public celebration constitutes a genuine popular festival. The medieval carnival in Bakhtin's view targeted the actual holders of power: rulers, church officials and their allies. The sham celebrations of Stalinist Russia offered up fallen scapegoats—purged elites and intellectuals—while keeping the true masters safely enshrined in cults of adoration. In Bakhtin's somewhat idealistic view, a genuine carnival cannot be used as an instrument of oppression, as above all, he notes, true carnival suspends "all the forms of terror" (*Dostoevsky* 122-23).

Bakhtin identifies the adversary of genuine popular celebration as the "classical canon" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rather than targeting Soviet culture directly. Nonetheless, hardly more rigid a canon could have existed than that dictated by the Soviet Socialist Realist cultural machine. Unlike the rigid "classical canon," the popular carnival aims: "to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 34). With the establishment of the classical canon, however, "the state encroached upon festive life and turned it into a parade," while "the privileges which were formerly allowed the marketplace were more and more restricted. The carnival spirit with its freedom, its — utopian character oriented toward the future, was gradually transformed into a mere holiday mood. The feast ceased almost entirely to be the people's second life, their temporary renaissance and renewal" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 33). With this essential contrast of popular and state-sponsored carnival in mind, I turn to Idris's and Mahfouz's texts, which lay bare the inadequacy of government-orchestrated imitations of social inversion (on Mahfouz, see also Al-leithy <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/12>>; DiMeo <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss3/10>>). While the fall of iron-handed police figures from their secure positions into the hands of their former victims resembles the dissolution of hierarchies inherent in carnival, both Idris and Mahfouz — like Bakhtin — condition their interpretations of this attempted carnival on the social and political context. In painting these state-sponsored purges as unsatisfying mass manipulation techniques, Idris and Mahfouz shift attention to the still rigid political structures that remain untouched by the events.

Idris, who once compared his writing to an "atomic bomb" (Idris qtd. in Kurpershoek 55), had much cause for bitterness toward the Egyptian security forces. Imprisoned three times under both the monarchy and the Nasser regime for his sharp tongue and pen, Idris made no effort to curb either despite the repeated punishments. His 1962 novella *The Black Policeman*, like Mahfouz's 1974 *al-*

*Karnak*, examines the institutionalized brutality of a previous regime — in this case, the Egyptian monarchy that Nasser overthrew in 1952. Idris based the novella on the story of a former police interrogator whose case had been exposed in the newspapers as evidence of the excesses of the former government. His observations about the societal damage inflicted by state brutality, however, show no distinction between one regime and the other. The first-person narrator shares a strong biographical resemblance to Idris himself, both as a medical doctor and former political activist. His narrative focuses on a long-time colleague, named Shawqi, whom the narrator has known since their university days. Shawqi has been traumatized by the brutal treatment he suffered as a political prisoner to the extent that the narrator hardly recognizes the man behind the face (on recent work on trauma, see, e.g., Abdelfattah <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/12>>; Caspi <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/10>>). Initially silent about his experiences, Shawqi opens up when a notorious police interrogator known as the "Black Policeman" is publicly purged and exposed in the state-run newspapers. With dramatic flair, the media has sensationalized the story of the torturer, once so dreaded that prisoners instantly recognized the sound of his footsteps and his key in the lock of their cells. Shawqi peels some of the garnish away from this trumped up feast by revealing that the journalistic accounts have been largely mythologized. Even the villain's supposedly "black" complexion has been exaggerated. Shawqi verifies, however, the reports of excessive brutality, adding "do you know whom the Black Policeman was hitting there from morning till night? ... It was me" (77). Ostensibly, this kind of confession signals the type of healing intended by the Black Policeman's public condemnation. By knocking the tyrant from his secure position, stripping him of his honors, and putting him in reach of his former victims, this media scourging points to the concept of carnival.

The failure of this supposed "carnival" to induce any change in Shawqi concerns the narrator. The novella, then, becomes a record of the narrator's quest to see behind Shawqi's mask of confusion and fear and understand why Shawqi has not healed. In a note instructive to the current generation striving to understand Egypt's past and chart a course toward the future, the narrator confesses: "there was something about Shawqi which disturbed me, and I didn't know what caused it ... I realize that as I sit here to write what happened I have only one aim: to succeed by means of writing where I have failed in my silent reflections ... who knows, when I finish I may have explained everything and reached the truth; so far my efforts in this direction have just left me confused" (53). From the start, his uncertainty warns against simplistic solutions to the lingering damage left by institutionalized brutality. Despite knowing Shawqi's history and having shared much of it himself, this seasoned veteran of Egypt's volatile political climate finds no simple explanation for Shawqi's condition. Flashbacks to his university days reveal Shawqi as an energetic political firebrand, unafraid of confronting authority. Leading the student opposition to the monarchy and British occupation, Shawqi believed himself "destined to save our country and change the fate of our people radically and for ever" (56). Personally, Shawqi possessed "tremendous strength of will" while "prepared almost to kill to defend his own position" (57). The narrator was not alone in seeing these strong qualities. Shawqi attracted legions of followers with his idealism, his "self-assured smile" (57) and the "attraction from the deep conviction which glowed through his being and expressed itself on his face, concentrated in his eyes" (60). After his transformation in prison, however, Shawqi has lost all of these defining characteristics. His face now looks "like a mask," with a "smile that didn't express anything" that can only "deflect your gaze and prevent your eyes meeting his even for a second — as if in that second you would grasp his mystery and understand what was wrong with him" (53). The spell-binding power in Shawqi's eyes had "died, and all that was left was a dull glimmer, a mere indication that life was present" (60). Yet, knowing how Shawqi has suffered does not answer the narrator's questions. He laments: "I was convinced that he was not the type of person to abandon his views after a few months in prison" (60). Shawqi's treatment, however, transcended mere intimidation, instead reaching to a profound restructuring of his entire being, a restructuring methodically and mercilessly executed by the state. Prison poisoned his relationship to society, leaving this formerly gregarious advocate of the rights of the masses convinced that "his fellow human beings ... were lying in wait for him and would not rest until he was routed" (70). Once a compassionate defender of the poor, Shawqi now appalls his co-workers with his callous treatment of the lower class patients he has been assigned to serve. Even the student comrades who once looked upon him as their leader now see him as

merely "an object of scorn and derision" (61). So complete is his alienation from the society he once hoped to lead that "his tragedy was that he must continue to live alongside those whom he dreaded and feared" (70). With his entire world restructured in order to force him into a submissive position in a rigid hierarchy, can Shawqi be liberated by the carnivalistic fall of the Black Policeman? The narrator's central question, indeed, is one facing any repressed society after a major political upheaval.

Free, genuine communication constitutes one of the key pillars of Bakhtin's medieval carnival, marked, perhaps counter-intuitively, by abusive, insulting language (*Rabelais* 16-17). Looking fondly back on their days in opposing factions at the university, the narrator recalls this same type of communication marking his relationship to Shawqi. A strong friendship based on mutual respect bound them as friends, despite his view that "there was no particular reason for us to be friends" and that they had "nothing in common as far as our political affiliations and opinions about people and life in general" (55-56). In a Bakhtinian tone, the narrator notes that on occasion they "almost came to blows" and "exchanged insults" (56). Validating the healing power of this passionate communication, the narrator cites his political adversary Shawqi as teaching him to "welcome every sincere act even if it originated with those who did not share my opinions and were hostile to my beliefs" (59). The constructive role of explosive, often bitter communication in creating a spirit of openness and respect parallels the positive results Bakhtin saw in abusive sounding marketplace language. The state's reprogramming, however, leaves none of this. After prison, the once effusive Shawqi finds all communication repellent. The narrator now sees only a recluse who avoids, above all, the politics which once animated him.

Having manifested little change from the public condemnation of his former jailer, Shawqi is then summoned to a final carnival spectacle, as he, one of many government health inspectors available, receives orders to perform a medical examination on Abbas al-Zanfali, the man once known as the "Black Policeman." Although Shawqi shows no eagerness for the task, the narrator awaits the confrontation with great anticipation, asking the story's central question: will this orchestrated encounter finally heal Shawqi? Conducting research to prepare himself for the showdown, the narrator finds in the Black Policeman a story of transformation as shocking as that which produced the new, degraded Shawqi. Reading al-Zanfali's file, the narrator expects to find signs of a person alien to his own social, cultural, or medical background that would explain his barbarity. Instead, the narrator notes "to my surprise that he was one of us" (65). When they finally meet him, al-Zanfali has become a psychotic mess, a "skeleton of a man" ruined by depression, drug abuse and violent seizures (92). The parallels between the narrator's descriptions of the now wrecked al-Zanfali and his earlier descriptions of Shawqi, down to their lifeless eyes, are unmistakable. The staged carnival has erased all former differences between Shawqi and al-Zanfali and thrown them together giving Shawqi the upper hand to vent his frustration on a helpless effigy of the security apparatus. The resulting meeting initially plays out like the carnival the state intends it to be. Although recognizing that the lifeless wreck before him is a very inadequate substitute for the prison system, Shawqi nevertheless launches into a tirade against al-Zanfali, exposing the scars on his back and recounting the horror that the Black Policeman inflicted upon him. At first, al-Zanfali disappoints even in the pathetic role assigned to him in this farce, staring numbly into space, rather than reacting. Yet Shawqi persists to press the zombie-like hulk until the former policeman finally complies with a grotesque spectacle of self-mutilation, biting viciously into his own arm and requiring three people to stop the bloody carnival act. In a different political context, al-Zanfali, twisted and debased on so many levels, could have made a fine sample of the "grotesque body" Bakhtin identified as a central carnival motif and Shawqi might have experienced the process of death and rebirth that the grotesque heralds. Indeed, the initial signs point towards a genuine healing. As he accompanies Shawqi from the spectacle, the narrator predicts that Shawqi from now on will be "sloughing off the pain and fear and coming back. Surely now I would leave the room in the company of the person whom I had despaired of ever bringing back to life" (92). With newfound vigor, the reborn Shawqi launches into a writing project to share his spiritual liberation. He delves into references like "The Philosophy of Torture" and "The Infliction of Pain as a Double-Edged Weapon" (96). Once unwilling to open the scars of his past, he now analyzes them: "Do you know that when you hurt somebody else you hurt yourself without realizing it?" (96). From the pen of Idris, a medical professional and political activist who had suffered like Shawqi, but turned



townwriting to improve society, the turnaround could hardly be more promising. Moreover, Shawqi's healing work encompasses not only victims like himself, but an anthropological humanitarian interest in those who abused him, like al-Zanfali. Unfortunately, Shawqi's revival proves short lived. The narrator observes to his dismay that "what I had witnessed in Abbas' room was nothing more than a brief recovery of consciousness before death" (96). Sliding back into to his former, defeated self, "Shawqi, having once lost his sense of security as a human being, could never retrieve it and become one of us again" (96). Here Idris, who is an experienced physician, looks beyond the initial euphoria that reckoning provides. For all its trappings, the carnival staged for Shawqi has not brought genuine cleansing.

In dealing with the political context, the novella treads lightly, but as boldly as possible in the Nasser era. For all its pretense of dealing with the crimes of the previous regime, the most damning aspect of Idris's text is its lack of any demarcation between that regime and the Nasser state under which he wrote. The Black Policeman had been paraded about to highlight the evil of the pre-Nasser regime, but the narrator makes no mention of any change in national spirit after the 1952 revolution. Had the Nasser revolution truly inaugurated a new era, as was promised, Shawqi would have had reason to celebrate a victory at the end of his suffering. Of course, an unspoken, but ubiquitous knowledge of the ongoing heavy-handed security measures of the Nasser era underlies the text. The narrator's observations throughout the text point to the damage of brutality, regardless of its source or justification. As Albert Camus noted: "for the artist there are no privileged torturers" (204). Shawqi's carnival was but a sham, as the true holders of power were never made to join him. The role Abbas al-Zanfali once held, has been filled by some other, unseen, unmentioned interrogator, completely removed from the spectacle to which Shawqi was invited. The genuine target of popular passions could only have been the current jailers, who instead remained hidden, secure in their positions of power during the spectacle. *The Black Policeman* offers no signs that the Nasser revolution has brought the kind of social inversion that a genuine carnival offers.

The arrival of the Sadat government in 1970 brought another round of purges and condemnations of the excesses of the past regime. Mahfouz's *al-Karnak*, like Idris's *The Black Policeman*, addressed the effectiveness of this punishment ritual in healing a damaged generation. Despite the dramatic fall of the former agents of terror into the hands of their victims, *al-Karnak* offers no more hope of finding national healing while the structure of a security state remains in place than did *The Black Policeman*. Like Idris, Mahfouz was a leading voice for social justice and his views were not easily dismissed. Although Mahfouz refused to be pigeonholed into any doctrinal school of writing, *multazim* writers and critics saw him as the exemplar of the committed writer. His prolific literary career began in 1930 in the pages of *al-Majalla al-Jadida* (The New Journal) published by Salamah Musa, one of the earliest advocates of committed writing. Ahmad Muhammad 'Atiya, a proponent of *al-adab al-multazim* found the spirit of writing for social justice evident from Mahfouz's earliest work (145). In the eyes of leading *multazim* critics like Mahmud Amin al-'Alim and Anwar al-Ma'adawi, Mahfouz's realist works of the 1940s and 50s reached unprecedented levels of fidelity in their depiction of the conditions of the working classes (al-'Alim 46-56; al-Ma'adawi "Bidaya" 757). Yet by the 1960s, Mahfouz's work had taken a decidedly pessimistic turn, evident in novels like *The Thief and the Dogs*, *The Beggar*, and *Adrift on the Nile*. The pillars of *al-adab al-multazim* — the partnership of writer, state, and public to bring reform through awareness of injustice — are described negatively in these works.

The disillusioned characters of Mahfouz's post-1960 novels often isolated themselves from society — on a boat in the Nile, in the criminal underworld or in the rooms of an Alexandria pension (*Adrift on the Nile*, *The Thief and the Dogs*, and *Miramar*, respectively). His 1974 novel *al-Karnak* is no exception, filled with characters typical of his later period: bitter, disillusioned former activists wounded by an oppressive police state and living among a calloused public. Like Shawqi in *The Black Policeman*, the characters of *al-Karnak* have surrendered their once indomitable drive for social justice after extended periods of brutality in police prisons. Now, defeated souls while away their time in the eponymous Karnak café, the name, evoking ancient Egypt's largest Pharaonic temple, a monument to bygone splendor and resting place of the departed. Indeed, the motif of ghostly spirits permeates the novel. The café's owner continually refers to her patrons as "phantoms" or "ghosts," suggesting not only a hollow remnant of a once complete human being, but also one drained of life by murder, or the theft of a spirit. Their spirits, it turns out, have been stolen in the same way as Shawqi's.

Our window onto this broken generation, as in *The Black Policeman*, comes through an unnamed first-person narrator who bears more than a passing similarity to the author. Like Mahfouz, famed for spending his time meeting the people of Cairo in cafés, his surrogate comes to the Karnak café, intrigued by the stories of shell-shocked patrons. Just as the greatness of the Pharaonic Karnak temple can only be revived through imagination, the past vigor of the beaten men and women of the café can only be seen through flashback. As with the study of Shawqi, the pre- and post-incarceration personalities of the narrator's subjects offer stark comparisons. The narrator charts the trajectory of their generation from a clearly defined beginning: "for most of them, history started with the revolution, leaving behind a hateful and obscure feudal system. They were the true children of the revolution" (73). Indeed, their early lives evince a wholehearted embrace of the promise of the Nasser revolution, despite emerging signs of corruption in the name of social transformation: "Are you talking about bribery, corruption and embezzlement, about oppression and intimidation? So what? Let it be. It's a necessary evil" (73). After three brutal prison terms, the group's lead spokesman, the bold Isma'il al-Shaykh remains a believer in the principles of socialism, although the Egyptian state has forfeited his loyalty: "We had no real socialism in our life. I'll never abandon socialism, even though I wish to cut off the hands that applied it in Egypt," he explains (94).

Isma'il desires a fair confrontation and the chance to confront those misguided "hands." A genuine carnival would afford such an opportunity. Isma'il's frustration, however, is to be denied ever seeing "the hands that applied" (95) this twisted imitation of socialism. Instead, he finds in prison a world of darkness and phantoms. Left in a dark cell for days at a time, he is blinded when dragged out for interrogation under bright lights, while the figures that beat him remain vague shapes and unseen hands. Mahfouz's merging of torturer and victim through the same metaphors of ghostliness runs through the novel, culminating in their bizarre confrontation at the narrative's end. Despite his imprisonment in darkness without charge, Isma'il continues to nurture a hope that he will eventually confront his adversary. While most of the agents of his torture never descend into his field of vision, Isma'il feels a sense of relief when brought before the only identifiable face of state oppression he will ever encounter: the vicious interrogator Khalid Safwan. Safwan's name strikes fear in all prisoners and will serve as the metonym for the security apparatus for their generation, yet so great is Isma'il's desire to be given some access to his opponent that he welcomes his appearance before Safwan. If not the complete equality of a medieval carnival, Isma'il at least hopes for enough leveling of their statuses to allow him to present his case to an officer of the government.

Isma'il, like Shawqi before him, is not one to yield his position because of intimidation, nor would he let the threat of violence silence him from speaking the truth. Khalid Safwan, however, denies him a genuine opportunity for communication by twisting Isma'il's own language into a coded discourse that buries the truth. Isma'il's only crime, he learns, was to have donated a qursh, the smallest unit of Egyptian currency, to a mosque, a charitable act now recoded as a threat to national security. Moreover, Isma'il is presented the farce that the police have detained him—in horrible conditions—for his own protection, while detectives work tirelessly to clear his name. Meanwhile, the normally clean-shaven Isma'il, a known leftist, has been locked up in a cell with no access to a razor, only to then be accused of being a Muslim Brother because he has since grown a beard, the tell-tale sign of an Islamist. Thus, Khalid Safwan ensures Isma'il will suffer not for the principles in which he believes, but for ideals that are anathema to his own. Upon releasing Isma'il, Safwan orders him to recode his entire trauma as "a period of hospitality" repeating twice to never forget he was "well treated" or else be returned for more (101-02). Rather than the unbridled discourse of the medieval marketplace, in which commoners could unloose their frustrations at those in power, this state-controlled language twists Isma'il's existing vocabulary such that each signifier comes to mean its opposite.

Degradation comes not through the smearing of the powerful, but rather as Safwan debases Isma'il's beloved girlfriend Zaynab by stealing her virtue. The highly sought-after Zaynab had rejected many rich suitors, keeping herself both sexually and ideologically pure for Isma'il. Yet, after experiencing rape and sexual humiliation at the hand of unseen attackers in the prison, Zaynab no longer considers herself worthy of a man like Isma'il and their marriage plans fall apart. Instead, Zaynab accepts the recoding that Safwan has forced upon her, openly labeling herself a whore as she engages in sex for money with men she once considered beneath her. Menahem Milson addresses the use of the instantly recognizable name "Zaynab" in Mahfouz's earlier novel *The Beggar*, evoking



eponymous heroine of the often-cited "first Arabic novel," a pure peasant virgin who represents the Egyptian nation (242-43). Appearing again in *al-Karnak*, the name revives the none too subtle suggestion of the regime turning the pure virgin nation into a whore through oppression. The power to make a body grotesque now belongs solely to the state and is used for control, not rebirth.

Social relationships are indeed altered, not for release of public tension, but rather for solidifying state power. The security apparatus desires not to break up this group of activists, but rather to redesign their social network. Thus, Safwan recodes ties of devotion into relationships of suspicion, forcing both Zaynab and Isma'il to spy on each other once released from prison. Safwan inverts their mutual devotion and desire to protect each other into weapons against them, threatening to punish the other should one shirk his or her duty. Isma'il's one attempt to defy Safwan by failing to report his friends causes the entire group to be rounded up and tortured. In this inversion of their pre-imprisonment world, actions aimed at protecting the group have the opposite effect. Even their language becomes inverted and twisted in this atmosphere of paranoia: "Every joke became ambiguous...in every look, innocence was tainted by apprehension" (80). Again, the state stifles communication by appropriating and recoding the language that once expressed liberation. These claustrophobic conditions have left this generation in desperate need of the emotional release of a genuine carnival and they will soon be presented with something that at least superficially resembles one.

As it did for Shawqi, the moment of confrontation comes about through the political purges of a new regime. For the Karnak café's generation of wounded activists, the name Khalid Safwan has served as a metonym for state oppression. Indeed, Safwan is the only government agent most of them have ever actually seen in their prison experiences, the rest remaining shadows. The narrator invokes this symbol of government control in their lives at one point by cautioning the others "let's imagine that Khalid Safwan is sitting with us" (86). This image conjures up the most frightening invasion of privacy they can envision, powerful for its inherent impossibility. While they could imagine the evil interrogator appearing in a number of contexts — victim of their revenge, or perhaps bursting in to arrest them again — Khalid Safwan joining their café circle is not an image that springs to mind. That is, not until the day Khalid Safwan actually walks in the door of the Karnak café. Having lost his position in the police, Safwan has been swept up in the purges after the 1967 military defeat and thrown in prison for three years. Having been physically and psychologically broken himself, Safwan has chosen the natural place to waste away among the rest of the ghosts. Certainly, a conventional reading of the narrative would suggest, the moment for carnivalistic restitution has come. Like Abbas al-Zanfali, Safwan has been thrown out among his victims, a stitched-up devil to be beaten in place of the real, intangible one. Roles have been overturned: the strong are now weak, the fettered are now free, the one who hid behind the power of the state is now its enemy. Just as they were for the peasant, these conditions constitute an invitation to bacchanalia — an unleashing of passions — and indeed, the more excessive the masses' reaction, the better served the state's purpose of dispensing with a now useless Khalid Safwan. The novel's anticlimax, however, takes such an unorthodox turn after this confrontation that Mahfouz critic Rasheed El-Enany's considered it inherently "unpalatable within the logic of the novel" and evidence of Mahfouz's tendency to "abandon every good principle of fiction writing" in his later works. The denouement, El-Enany felt, was reason enough to dismiss *al-Karnak* as a whole as "artistically negligible" (116-19). Yet, carnival is often unpalatable in its mixing of filthy and clean, conventional and bizarre and in the odd conclusion to *al-Karnak* Mahfouz replaces a state-sponsored sham carnival with one of his own.

Although all parties in the café recognize each other, none can play their expected roles with any conviction. Qaranfula, the café owner, makes the sole, half-hearted, attempt to clarify their positions, but instead gets lost in a circular exchange with Safwan, who insists they are all victims of the state. This is the closest *al-Karnak* comes to any conclusive statement about the business of reconciling with the past. The other members of the café group are content to engage in general philosophical speculation with Safwan, finding his obscure insights somewhat comforting. After some awkwardness, the narrator notes they had accepted Safwan as a companion and indeed, by the end of the novel, Khalid seems to have become rather popular. As a plausible resolution to the experience of imprisonment and police brutality, the denouement is indeed difficult to swallow. Yet Mahfouz here serves up a carnival that exposes the inadequacy of the one the state has attempted to stage through

its scourging of Khalid Safwan. The novel places the state-run carnival in the political frame of a still oppressive Egyptian state, frustrating expectations for a neat closure. As in *The Black Policeman*, the state offers up for abuse not the genuine holders of power, but cast-off waste products. Safwan has been replaced by another prison interrogator, one the public cannot reach. Until the current holders of power can be made to participate in the carnival, it will be a sham. If *al-Karnak* is truly unpalatable, it is for denying a conventional catharsis to swallow.

The only carnivalesque inversion comes in *al-Karnak's* upending and mocking of the conventional expectations of catharsis through revenge. Khalid Safwan, Isma'il and all the other patrons of the café act as parodies of their assigned roles, trampling the sacredness of conventionally expected resolution to this conflict. Just as Shawqi could not find closure in his research into "victims" and "torturers," the patrons of Karnak café would find no healing by attacking Khalid Safwan. The true objects of their fury — the "hands" Isma'il wished to "cut off" — had not yet been brought into the carnival. Idris and Mahfouz, from their vantage points in the 1960s and 1970s, did not address a time when that carnival could become genuine and complete, but with the revolution of 2011, such a day dawns perhaps. The writers of *al-adab al-multazim* did not occupy, nor envision, a world with the means of mass communication like those that mobilized millions in 2011. The firm state control over the means of distributing the written word, which seemed inviolable in the 1960s and 1970s, has been more clearly overturned and mocked than any other element of the old society. With the vulnerability of any government pronouncement to being mirrored, hacked, or parodied online, carnival rules in the domain of public communication. Thus, the most outdated of the characters in the Karnak café may be its aspiring author, Hilmi Hamada, who has died before the anticlimactic confrontation with Safwan. Hilmi, who intended the most subversive of political acts — writing a book that would reveal "the secret lives of Egyptian men and women ... of the old regime ... and the present one, too!" (75-76) — refuses to surrender to police pressure. For his obstinacy, Safwan not only has Hilmi killed, but forces the other activists to watch his body dangle from a rope, thus recoding him as a symbol the futility of defiance. Today, an Egyptian government could not hang enough Hamadas to reassert its control over the written word. Likewise, Youtube and Wikileaks have denied any *Black Policeman* or Safwan a hiding place inside the bowels of the security apparatus. The electronic revolution has also removed the genre restrictions which limited earlier authors. Until very recently, Mahfouz's audience had only two means of accessing his work: in his written novels or the more popular films into which half those novels have been made (see, e.g., *al-Karnak*). Despite the esteemed position of Mahfouz's novels in Egyptian society, far more Egyptians have seen the films than read his books. In this vein, the film *al-Karnak* became what Roger Allen labeled "a highly opportunistic and propagandistic film" (203) for much of the nuance surrounding the character of Safwan was removed for the film audience. Most notably, the novel's provocative denouement was replaced with a limply conventional and entirely unsatisfying scolding of Safwan. In the contemporary world of electronic communication, however, the sharp dividing line between the mass-market film and novel has been replaced by a wide spectrum of genres. The Facebook generation, whose posts can range from the absolutely banal to the complex and profound, can re-engage and debate the questions Idris and Mahfouz raised over forums not previously available. Today's Egyptian novelists span the spectrum from blog posts to printed novels, producing many hybrid products in between those extremes.

In conclusion, developments in Egypt today promise more open social communication than Idris and Mahfouz envisioned. A carnivalesque spirit allows for the criticism and vilification of the figures of authority, whether officially sanctioned or not. With the fall of the Mubarak regime, hundreds of Safwans and al-Zanfalis will find themselves in the hands of a mass public with their previously sacred safeguards removed. Yet, the deeper issues that Idris and Mahfouz problematized remain. In particular, works like *The Black Policeman* and *al-Karnak* continue to resonate in an electronic age for their insightful contrast between festivals of public anger and the genuine spirit of social and political leveling, in Bakhtin's words "the chance to have a new outlook on the world ... and to enter a completely new order of things" (*Rabelais* 34).

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